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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/12/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: BELARUS ON THE EVE OF THE G8 SUMMIT

REF: MINSK 708

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Many in the Belarusian opposition are hopeful G-7 leaders will raise Belarus at the G8 Summit in St. Petersburg in an effort to convince Russia to stop both its support for the repressive Lukashenko regime and its efforts to establish a union with Belarus that could extinguish defacto Belarusian independence. Since Lukashenko's March 19 re-election, which many consider the tacit support Putin gave Lukashenko facilitated, Lukashenko has come under great pressure from Russia to pay his bill for that support - namely to allow Russian companies to own and control the strategic pipelines connecting the Russian gas and oil system to Western Europe and to move on holding a referendum to create a "more perfect union" of the two countries effectively making Belarus a more perfect vassal state.

¶2. (C) Faced with hostility from the U.S. and the EU and these pressures from Russia, Lukashenko is clearly feeling the heat. The opposition's nightmare is that Lukashenko will have no choice but to submit to Moscow's diktat resulting in neither a more democratic nor an independent Belarus. Giving in to Russian control would reduce Lukashenko's power but probably not affect his regime's repression of the opposition whom Russia sees as proponents of a pro-U.S.-EU orientation for Belarus.

¶3. (C) Opposition leader Milinkevich, who sent an appeal to G-8 leaders (reftel), sees maintaining Belarus' independence against Russian pressure as even more important than promoting democratic change in Belarus. He has even said he would support Lukashenko if it meant keeping Belarus independent. He calls for the G-7 to exert maximum pressure on Russia to prevent it from effectively taking over Belarus. He harbors little hope Putin could ever be persuaded to promote democratic change in Belarus.

¶4. (C) For his part Lukashenko has not appealed to the G-8 but has made public statements criticizing Russian pressures and claims he would never surrender Belarusian political independence or economic control to Russia. The regime continues to laud its relations with Russia but now states that China is Belarus' most important strategic partner as a hedge against pressures from the West and Russia.

¶5. (C) As for the prospects for democratic change, despite the surprising turnout of support for the opposition March 19, currently the opposition seems to be losing the momentum it was building among the population during the shortly contested and highly manipulated presidential elections. Leadership rivalries and the penchant for opposition leaders to spend their time on foreign trips seeking foreign support rather than building up support among the Belarusian people have damaged the opposition leadership in the eyes of many

who came out to demonstrate for change March 19 and March 25. But a new generation of activists less connected to the old opposition structures seems to be emerging.

16. (C) In the meantime the regime continues its repressive actions against its opponents but with increasingly mixed results. The sense even in government circles is that Belarus is entering a transition phase with the old leadership, including Lukashenko and the old opposition, on their way out in the next five years. The question is what comes after - an independent democratic Belarus, an independent but still authoritarian Belarus, or a Belarus under tighter Russian control neither independent nor democratic.

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